



ALASKA NATIVE TRIBAL HEALTH CONSORTIUM

Environmental Health & Engineering

MEMORANDUM

DATE: July 29, 2019
FROM: Youth Outreach Volunteer in Service to America (VISTA), DEHE
SUBJECT: Trip Report – Newtok – May 8-9, 2019
TO: FOR THE RECORD

OBJECTIVE:

- Hold a community visioning meeting for Water is Life to inform residents of the project and gather ideas for the play.

Water is Life is a project developed by the National Tribal Water Center to engage communities in water-centered education using art. In Newtok, the art activity will be a school play with participation from youth of all age groups. The play with other activities will leverage the tremendous cultural assets held by Newtok. The play and associated activities will supplement education efforts to address local barriers in water system sustainability and promote sustainable practices in Mertarvik, the relocation town site.

- Introduce Ty to the community and the council in his role as the Water is Life Project play director.

As part of the Water is Life project, an Alaska Native or Native American artist is recruited to help with the art creation process. As a performer, writer and activist, Ty will serve as the play's collaborating director and playwright.

- Interview elders on traditions and practices surrounding water.

ATTENDEES:

- Marleah LaBelle, ANTHC
- Elizabeth (Liz) Wulbrecht, ANTHC
- Ty Defoe, representing himself

FINDINGS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

On Wednesday, May 8, 2019, the traveling party flew to Bethel via Alaska Airlines, arriving in Bethel at approximately 2230. Marleah and Liz spent the night at the Dull House and Ty at Old Mission House. The following morning, Marleah, Liz, and Ty traveled to Grant Aviation for the early flight to Newtok. Michelle DeWitt, the executive director of the Bethel Community Services Foundation stopped by Grant Aviation to talk with Marleah about potential funding opportunities for the Mertarvik relocation. The flight was delayed and the group did not arrive in Newtok until approximately 1230.

Upon arriving, the group went first to the school, where they informed the principal and the teachers of their plan for the evening – to hold a community visioning meeting in the gym with food prepared in the school kitchen. The meeting would be used to gather content for the play. Afterwards, Ty, Liz, and Marleah went to the council building to check in with Andrew John, the tribal administrator. He scheduled time with Mark and Mary George, two elders in the community, to speak with us about the Water is Life project.

Mark and Mary George were both born in the 1940s. They saw development of the school and church at Newtok and its establishment as a permanent site. Mary shared that as a child, she lived a nomadic way of life and that Newtok was formed from three separate camps north and further interior than the current town site. The camps moved to the area because of a church that was built in 1929 and later moved by dogsled and placed near Newtok's post office. A year after the church was moved, the BIA established a school and because of the church and the school, all of the surrounding camps and domiciles settled at Newtok. Of the settlements near Newtok, Kelavek was the most populated. On Christmas, Easter, and other important Catholic holidays, the surrounding villages would meet there to celebrate. The smaller villages ranged from 2 to 7 or 8 sod houses. Mary shared that the structures are no longer there, but you can still find the dugout foundations. The tundra has reclaimed the old dwellings. There is just grass there now and the imprint of the past.

One of Mary's earliest memories concerning water was traveling along a tributary near Mertarvik in a homemade wooden boat with her parents. The boat had a motor and they sailed across Baird Inlet and traveled to Bethel to fish for salmon from May until September. Mark remembers seeing Andrew's grandmother's father in a boat made out of sealskin large enough to hold their belongings, five people, and an additional 7 or 8 ducks. Mary commented, "nobody can do that anymore...now they got lots in the house." People had less stuff in the past, she explained, and always calm weather, sunshine, and quiet. "The memories are glorious when they first moved to this location as their permanent home...The tundra, the ground was much higher than it is today...In the spring and fall time was when it was the most beautiful." As soon as the river froze, they ice-skated. They made homemade skates from wood and metal and used hide to tie the skate piece onto the bottom of their shoes.

Andrew asked, in Yup'ik, what traditions and ceremonies they have witnessed surrounding water. Mark responded that he observed the late Autumn Moses perform a ceremony for good weather using beach grass, which he braided together to construct a human figure in a kayak. He lit the figure on fire and placed it in the ocean where it was pulled out by the tide. This ceremony would ensure a change to better weather in a day or two. Mary asked for the question to be refined as it was too broad and she was having trouble coming up with an answer. In the future, questions could be reviewed by Paul or George, two elders on the council, to help improve their clarity and relevance to the community.

Andrew asked about water ways in the community. The Ninglick, which now looks like the ocean rather than a river, used to be a creek that you could hop over. Near Mertarvik there was a river with a strong current running through it. This river merged with the Ninglick creek to form the Ninglick river.

Ty asked how Mary and Mark feel about moving. They are excited. Currently seasonal residents, they are ready to live in Mertarvik fulltime. Mary looks forward to her seasonal stay in Mertarvik every year because there is peace and quiet. It is dry and there are lot of blackberries. Mark explained that the area behind their house in Newtok floods with every (strong?) tide. Twenty years ago, the land was high ground. When they first built Newtok's homes, there were no roads or boardwalks and the grass was deep. George said that long ago, they used 55 gallon drums from the BIA and that the men of the community weren't worried about payment. By this, George could mean that the community did not pay for the drums or that community members worked for free and that now people expect to be paid to do work. They used the drums to dig a trench for water to travel away from the BIA school building. Mary explained that there were multiple locations where trenches were dug. The mud and water caused from the sinking of Newtok has buried those old trenches. Mary explained, "it is getting really fast, sinking, some of them (houses) are really going down. Us too...going down really fast."

The changes to Newtok's environment have impacted subsistence. Mary used to pick berries at a place where there is nothing now. By this, she could mean that the berries no longer grow or the river has swallowed the land where berries used to be. Mary said that "back in the 1950s we used to go hunt ptarmigans...there were lots...and across different birds hunted and eggs gathered...right now there is nothing."

After this mesmerizing story, Marleah, Ty, and Liz went to the school to prepare for the visioning meeting. The gym was set up and Ty and Marleah were escorted by Andrew on a tour of the community. He showed them the erosion so Ty could experience the devastation wrought by environmental change on the village.

At 1800, the community meeting commenced in the school gymnasium. Pizza, salad, and cookies was served to the approximately 100 to 150 residents that attended. After the food was served, Ty performed for a captivated audience. Ty, of Oneida and Objiwe heritage, played a beautiful composition on a flute, explained the origin of the hoop, and performed a startlingly complex hoop dance in full beaded regalia. Afterwards, the children asked if his dance was magic. Ty invited the children to participate in a group activity using the hoops and they all danced together. It was an extremely special event. The ability of Newtok's residents to smile, dance, and share with strangers highlights their generous spirit and resiliency in the face of drastic environmental change and meager living conditions. While we were there, the school's well pump broke and there was no running water at the school.

After Ty's performance, Marleah presented on the Water is Life project and elicited ideas from the community. They shared that water is used for bathing, washing hands and hair, and that it is safe for little ones. Water is also used for baptism and holy water. In a separate conversation, Martha, a senior at Newtok's school, shared that one should not say that the weather or water is scary when traveling because the weather and water has ears. If they hear you, they may react.

After the presentation, most of the audience left, but a handful of people stayed to perform Yup'ik dance. Marleah, Ty, and Liz were invited to join. The following afternoon, Bosco explained the meaning behind some of the dances performed. One song was about ocean

mammals and how they can hear us on land, even though it is louder in the ocean. Another, composed by Bosco, was about gathering underwater plants with his cousin. These plants grow in ponds and are used for soup.

On Thursday morning, Marleah, Liz, and Ty visited different classrooms at the school to discuss the project and play theater games with the kids. In the afternoon, Marleah, Liz, and Ty met with the council, where Ty was formally introduced and the council expressed their gratitude for his visit. Bosco spoke with us about Yup'ik dance.

The traveling party left Newtok at 1530 and arrived to Bethel at approximately 1630. The group left Bethel via Raven at approximately 1830 and arrived to Anchorage at 2030.

RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

- Pass interview questions to Paul or George, two elders on the council, to review for clarity and intelligibility.


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